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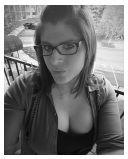
The murder of a female soldier has shown just how bad sexual violence is in the US military. As a soldier who was raped, I know



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Soldiers, officers and civilian employees attend the commencement ceremony for the U.S. Army's annual observance of Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month in the Pentagon Center Courtyard March 31, 2015 in Arlington, Virginia © Getty Images / Chip Somodevilla

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Allegations of systemic sexual abuse are spreading through the US military as service members speak up following the death of Vanessa Guillen. I was violently assaulted, and it's damn time the military faces scrutiny.

I wasn't yet 20 years old when in the eyes of a young adult my life was ruined.

I was a soldier just barely out of basic training when, during my Advanced Individual Training (AIT) tenure at Fort Meade, I was raped by a fellow classmate. It happened off base at a hotel that a large group of us would visit over the weekend to escape the confines of the barracks.

On one of those nights, I was in a room alone. I'd brought my Xbox 360 and Fallout 3 and it was just supposed to be a quiet weekend getaway, of sorts. Fellow service members were hanging out outside or in their own rooms, and at one point I wandered out to make an appearance.

Opening that door is the biggest mistake of my life. Why did I open that f**king door? My entire goal had been to be alone and play games. I should have stuck to my plan.

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I won't get into the vivid details, but on that night I was violated and it was violent, painful, and it set me on a path of fear and shame which resulted in a hospitalization at Walter Reed that lasted over a year, and which saw me make many attempts on my life. One such attempt landed me in an ICU for nearly a week after I swallowed an entire bottle of Zyprexa. I also carry scars on my right wrist where I cut through the skin to my vein.

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I'll never shake the image of that first squirt of blood. It literally hit the ceiling.

Today I'm 31, and in a much better place, but I'm haunted by the fact that my rapist walks free. I blame myself for that, as I probably should, but the army takes a share of the blame, too. In hindsight, I was silenced by a culture of fear.

The byline on this piece reads 'Sophia' as that's my legal first name, but back then I went by something else. I'm transgender, something I'd known since I was much younger and long before my rape, but I remained deeply in the closet until I was halfway through my 20s.

For the lack of better phrasing, I was a man during my time in the army, and I was raped by another man.

Don't ask, don't tell hadn't yet been repealed and in my young, stupid mind I thought I'd be the one getting in trouble for the rape, or that in the army's culture which – at least at the time – looks down on gay people, I'd be blamed for it. Through their eyes I believed they'd see me as a willing participant who merely regretted the act due to shame. Never mind the physical issues I was battling.

The rape left me bruised and physically scarred. I was bleeding from behind, and experiencing tremendous amounts of internal pain. Even my bladder gave out. The evidence for all of this is emergency room visits I made both off base, and to the hospital on base. When meeting a military doctor as they tried to figure out why I was having so many issues, including the blood, they asked if I'd had anal intercourse. I said no.

I was even given an STD by my rapist. Thankfully, it was just chlamydia and I was able to cure it with pills. When asked by a doctor about it, I denied having sex. They never pressed the issue.

All the signs I'd been raped were there, but no one cared to ask. It was that, or they knew and let it go.

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Truth be told, I never should have been a soldier. I’m not sure I can even be considered one. I didn’t finish all my training. When people tell me *“thank you for your service,”* I internally cringe. I become awash in shame. There was no service. There was just me – a confused and broken individual – who got raped by someone much stronger than me.

That I was a ‘soldier’ highlights a core issue with the military. Recruiters prey on the weak. In their chase for increased recruitment numbers, they go after the most vulnerable. Anyone that will say yes. They flood the services with people who have no right to be there. They hunt down the bullied and entice them with promises of a better life. Freedom from wrecked homes, broken lives, and the struggle of fitting in. It’s what wooed me.

So these young adults sign years of their lives away, and some succeed, but eventually others break, or in cases such as mine, abusers spot the fragile among the herd,

and they pounce. This is what gives rise to a military culture of systemic sexual abuse.

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I can't stress enough how obvious it'd been that I got raped. Yet perhaps in an effort to pretend it didn't happen, the military willingly accepted my alternative excuse. As a child I'd been sexually abused by my father. Something which had been deeply suppressed in my mind, but the rape brought old memories to the forefront, so as I was struggling to stay afloat from the then recent incident, another deluge was ensuring I drowned.

The bladder issues, the blood, the pain, the suicide attempts, the PTSD, the panic, the anxiety, all of it was blamed on my childhood abuse, and the army just went with it. Nothing ever got deeply questioned or prodded and I was medically retired with full benefits and pushed out of the army as quickly as possible.

Someone had to have known there was more to this, that the memories of childhood abuse weren't merely exacerbated by the stress of training but that something else had occurred, but I don't think they wanted my name to be another statistic. And the statistics are harrowing.

According to the Defense Department's 2019 report on sexual assault in the military, such abuse is on the rise with 7,825 reports for 2018, alone. Numbers which in no way would include people such as me, or others who for various reasons also stay silent. I can't help but ask how many show obvious signs of rape but are pressured into silence or made to feel ignored.

Just in my short time at Fort Meade, I know of other rape incidents, one even involved a female raping a drunk male in a bathroom stall. To my knowledge, that one was at least investigated. But think of the countless others that are not.

Thankfully for me, I'm in a much better place. After wasting most of my 20s in a pit of despair, failing to find adequate mental health therapy at my local Veterans Affairs hospital (a messed up story in its own right), I eventually pushed myself to start writing and to once again chase my passions.

A few years later and I'm the most resilient I've ever been. I recently ran into riots to chase a good story. I don't break when facing the onslaught of hate being a snarky firebrand personality online brings upon myself. I can talk about my rape without breaking down entirely. And I'm the most successful and accomplished I've ever been. But my road to healing was not an easy ride, and it took years of battling suicidal attempts and ideations, though I'm thankful I was eventually able to overcome it.

My trauma no longer defines me, but that it took so many years of my life is a problem nonetheless. That service members are being raped and their higher command is mishandling it, is a problem. That service members are being abused and sometimes killed, as in the case of Vanessa Guillen, is a problem.

The US military is rife with systemic sexual abuse, and that is a problem. One which it's about time the world shines a light on.

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